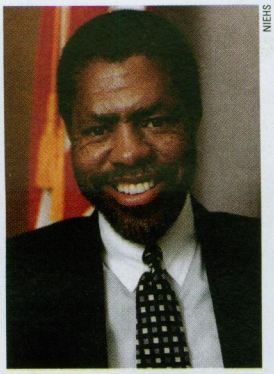
Olden Honored with Presidential Award

The 1997 Presidential Distinguished Executive Rank Award has been awarded to NIEHS Director Kenneth Olden. In addition to a $20,000 cash prize, the award recognizes Olden as a top government executive. The award was presented on 5 May 1998 by Vice President Al Gore in a ceremony at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC.


NIEHS

NIEHS Director Kenneth Olden

The Presidential Distinguished Executive Rank Award is presented in recognition of sustained extraordinary accomplishment by a federally employed executive. Nominees are reviewed annually by a board comprising representatives from business and industry, as well as private citizens. Final award recipients are approved by President Clinton.

The award recognizes Olden's successful and innovative leadership of the NIEHS. Olden has led the NIEHS and the National Toxicology Program as director since 1991. Once focused heavily on environmentally induced cancers, Olden widened the institute's range to include other disease endpoints in addition to cancer. In 1993, Olden created the NIEHS's first Office of Technology Transfer, which has since generated for the institute hundreds of thousands of dollars in research support and royalty income. Olden also embraced the concept of environmental justice, leading the Department of Health and Human Services to acknowledge not only particular socioeconomic and ethnic groups but also children and senior citizens as having special needs and risks in the face of the environmental effects of pollution. Finally, Olden's efforts have streamlined the NIEHS into a center dominated by research rather than by administration, and characterized by a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.

Olden cites the launching of the Environmental Genome Project as his most memorable accomplishment of the past year. Of future goals Olden says, "The challenge I see . . . is obtaining an adequate budget to address the important public health issues related to the environment. To accomplish this objective, the institute needs a budget twice what it currently has."

Olden earned his bachelor's degree in biology from Knoxville College in Tennessee, his master's degree from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and his doctoral degree from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His 26-year career has included positions at the Howard University Comprehensive Cancer Center in Washington, DC, the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, and Harvard University Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts.

As a cell biologist and biochemist, Olden has led many discoveries into the properties of cell surface molecules and their possible roles in cancer. Olden was the first to demonstrate that organ-specific metastasis of malignant cells can be prevented by blocking the interaction between the glycoprotein fibronectin and the integrin receptor (today, Olden is considered a leading expert on the structure and function of fibronectin). In 1994, in recognition of his contributions to the field of health, Olden was elected to membership in the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences.

EMF Review Forges Ahead

After years of heated debate on the issue of precisely how electric and magnetic fields (EMFs) affect human health, scientific consensus may be hovering on the horizon. A working group has been charged with compiling a report for NIEHS Director Kenneth Olden that appraises the strength of the scientific evidence of biological health effects due to exposure to 60-Hertz EMFs. On 15–24 June, the working group convened in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, to continue a process that began with three earlier NIEHS science review symposia by reviewing and summarizing the reports produced by those symposia.

The first symposium was held 24–27 March 1997 in Durham, North Carolina, and covered theoretical mechanisms and *in vitro* research findings. The second symposium was held 12–14 January 1998 in San Antonio, Texas, and covered epidemiological research results. The final symposium was held 6–9 April 1998 in Phoenix, Arizona, and covered clinical and *in vivo* laboratory findings. Each of the three scientific review symposia examined the quality and reproducibility of the published research findings in its particular domain, with the goal of eventually evaluating whether the scientific evidence supports a causal relationship between EMF exposures and adverse human health effects.

The road to reaching a scientific consensus on this thorny issue, whose controversial nature arises from the disparities among the findings of EMF research projects, has been a long one. However, points out Christopher J. Portier, director of the hazard evaluation project for the NIEHS Electric and Magnetic Fields Research and Public Information Dissemination Program and coordinator of the science review working group, it is important to note that the June report is the report only of this particular working group; it is a consensus on the science as it stands now, rather than a final word on the matter.

The working group's final report is expected to log in at a hefty 400 pages. Each article reviewed includes an evaluative summary by the group. The report has been disseminated to approximately 500 scientists, and will be open for public comment for a period of 60 days prior to being published. After that point, the report and comments will serve as tools for Olden in preparing a congressionally mandated report responding to the question of whether or not EMF exposures affect human health.

Portier says, "The most interesting thing about what we're doing is that it's never been done before. It's a unique approach to addressing a potential human health hazard." The process that will culminate in the working group's report has examined the entire breadth of a massive body of literature in great depth, with each portion of that body being evaluated by the specialists most qualified to judge it.

The working group consisted of approximately 40 scientists representing the spectrum of currently held opinions on EMF effects. The group included scientists representing interests ranging from public activists to industry advocates to government investigators. But, Portier clarifies, while the report was requested by the NIEHS, "[this report] is not the NIEHS's opinion. This group is not speaking for the NIEHS, they are speaking to the NIEHS."